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## ON THE MUTATION OF DESIRE

BIOPOLITICS CAPITALISM, DELEUZE/GUATTARI, DESIRE, SEXUALITY, SIMULATION

I started reading Félix Guattari in 1974. I was in a barracks in southern Italy, when military service was compulsory for young men of sound mind and body, but serving the country soon irritated me, and I was looking for a way out when a friend suggested that I read that French philosopher who recommended madness as a way to escape.

So I read *Una tomba per Edipo. Psicoanalisi e trasversalità* published by Bertani, and it inspired in me an act of madness. The colonel of the psychiatric clinic recognised me as insane and that is

how I managed to return home.

From that moment on, I came to consider Félix Guattari as a friend whose suggestions can help one to escape from any type of barracks.

In 1975, I published the first issue of a magazine called *A/traverso*, which translated schizoanalytic concepts into the language of the students' and young workers' movement of students known by the name of *Autonomia*.

In 1976, with a group of friends, I started broadcasting on the first Italian free radio, Radio Alice. The police intervened to shut down the radio during the three days of student revolt in Bologna, after the murder of Francesco Lorusso.

The Bologna movement of 1977 used the expression "desiring autonomy", and the small group of radio and magazine editors called themselves "transversales".

The reference to post-structuralism was explicit in the public statements, in the pamphlets, in the slogans of the spring of '77.

We had read Anti-Oedipus, and though we did not understand much, a word had caught our attention: the word "desire".

We understood this point well: the engine of the subjectivation process is desire. We must stop thinking in terms of the "subject", we must forget Hegel and the whole conception of subjectivity as something pre-packaged that simply has to be organised. There is no subject; there are currents of desire that flow through organisms that are at once biological, social, and sexual; and conscious, of course. But consciousness is not something that can be considered pure, indeterminate. Consciousness does not exist without the incessant work of the unconscious, of this laboratory that is not a theatre because an already written tragedy is not represented there, but a tragedy traversed by currents of desire that we write and rewrite without ceasing.

On the other hand, the concept of desire cannot be reduced to an always positive tension. The concept of desire holds the key to explaining waves of social solidarity and waves of aggression, to explaining outbursts of anger and the hardening of identity.

In short, desire is not a good and happy boy; on the contrary, it can twist about, close in on itself and end up producing effects of violence, destruction, barbarism.

Desire is the factor of intensity in the relationship with the other, but this intensity can go in very different and even contradictory directions.

Guattari also speaks of *ritornelli* [refrains], to define semiotic concatenations capable of relating to the environment. The *ritornello* is a vibration whose intensity can be concatenated with the intensity of this or that system of signs, that is, of psychosemiotic stimuli.

Desire is the perception of a *ritornello* that we produce to capture the lines of stimulation coming from the other (a body, a word, an image, a situation) and to weave a network with these lines.

In the same way, the orchid and the wasp, two beings that have nothing to do with each other, can produce useful effects for each other.

Desire is not a natural given, but an intensity that changes according to anthropological, technological and social conditions.

### *For a reconfiguration of desire*

It is, then, a question of problematising the concept of desire in the context of the current era, an era that can be defined by neoliberal acceleration and digital acceleration.

The neoliberal economy has accelerated the rate of exploitation of work, especially cognitive work. Digital connective technology has accelerated the circulation of information and, consequently, has intensified to the extreme the rate of semiotic stimulation, which is, at the same time, nerve stimulation.

This double acceleration is the origin and cause of the intensification of productivity that has made possible the increase in profits and the accumulation of capital, but it is also the origin and cause of the overexploitation of the human organism, in particular the brain.

Therefore, a task falls to us, that of distinguishing the effects that this overexploitation has produced in the equilibrium of the psyche and in the sensitivity of human beings as individuals, and above all, as collectivities.

In particular, it is about reflecting on the mutation that has affected desire, taking into account the trauma that the experience of the pandemic has produced in the collective psyche. The virus may have dissolved, the infection may have healed, but the trauma does not disappear overnight, it continues its work. And the work of the trauma manifests itself in a kind of phobic awareness of the body of the other, especially the skin, the lips, the sex.

During the two decades of the new century, various investigations have shown that sexuality is changing profoundly, and the viral shock has only reinforced this trend that has its roots in the techno-anthropological transformation of the last thirty years.

In the book *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy – and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood – and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (2017), Jean Twenge discusses the relationship between connective technology and changes in the psychological and affective behavior of generations that have been formed in a techno-cognitive environment of a numerical and connective nature.

I am in the habit of defining the humans who came into the world after the turn of the century as the generation that learned more words from a machine than from the singular voice of a human being.

In my opinion, this definition is useful to understand the depth of the mutation that we are analysing: we know from Freud that access to language cannot be understood without the affective dimension.

Nor should we forget what Agamben writes in his book *Language and Death*: the voice is the meeting point between flesh and meaning, between the body and meaning. The feminist philosopher Luisa Muraro also suggests that the learning of meaning is linked to the child's trust in their mother. I believe that a word means what it means because my mother told me; she established a relationship between the perceived object and a concept that means it.

The psychic foundation of the attribution of meaning is based on this primordial act of affective sharing, of cognitive co-evolution that guarantees the singular vibration of a voice, a body, a kind of sensitivity.

But then, what happens when the singular voice of the mother (or of another human being, it doesn't matter) is replaced by a machine?

The sense or meaning of the world is replaced then by the functionality of the signs that allow the attainment of operative results, on the basis of the reception and interpretation of signs devoid of all affective depth and, therefore, of all intimate certainty.

The concept of precariousness here displays its psychological and cognitive meaning as the embrittlement and de-eroticisation of the relationship with the world.

Eroticism as carnal intensity of experience and desire in its (non-exhaustive) relationship with eroticism are in dispute.

### *Desire and sexuality*

We generally associate desire with the flesh, with sexuality, with the body that approaches the other body. But it must be stressed that the sphere of desire cannot be reduced to its sexual dimension, although this implication is inscribed in history, anthropology and psychoanalysis. Desire is not identified with sexuality and, in fact, sexuality can be conceived without desire.

In the concept and reality of desire there is something more than sex, as the Freudian concept of sublimation shows us, which refers to the cathexis of desire itself that is not directly sexual.

The pandemic has completed a process of desexualizing desire that had been in the making for a long time, since communication between conscious and sensitive bodies in physical space was replaced by the exchange of semiotic stimuli in the absence of the body. This dematerialisation of the communicative exchange did not erase desire, but transferred it to a purely semiotic (or rather hyper-semiotic) dimension. Desire then developed in a non-sexual direction, or if you like, post-sexual, which came to manifest itself in the condition of isolation that the pandemic regularised and almost institutionalised. The entire theoretical and practical body of psychology, psychoanalysis, and even politics must be reconsidered because the underlying subjectivity has been irreversibly upended and transformed.

The Italian psychoanalyst Luigi Zoja has published a book on the exhaustion (and the tendency) of desire to disappear (the title is, in fact, *Il declino del desiderio*). It is a text full of very interesting data on the drastic reduction in the frequency of sexual contacts and, in general, the time dedicated to contact, to relationships involving physical presence. But the central hypothesis of

the book (the disappearance of desire) seems questionable to me. In my opinion, it is not desire itself that disappears, but the sexualised expression of desire. The phenomenology of contemporary affectivity is increasingly characterized by a drastic reduction in contact, pleasure, and the psychic and physical relaxation that skin-to-skin contact makes possible. This entails a loss of sensual trust, a loss of the feeling of deep complicity that makes social life tolerable: the pleasure of the skin that recognizes the other through touch, sensuality, the sweet enjoyment of the intimacy of the gaze.

### *The perversion of desire and contemporary aggressiveness*

De-sexualisation runs, in effect, the risk of turning desire into a hell of loneliness and suffering waiting to be expressed in one way or another. The senseless violence that increasingly breaks out in the form of armed and murderous aggression against more or less unknown innocents (the deadly attacks that have multiplied everywhere since Columbine in 1999, and of which the United States is the main theatre) is not more than the tip of the iceberg of a phenomenon that at a political level is disrupting the history of the entire world. How can the election of an individual like Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro by half the American or Brazilian people be explained, if not as a manifestation of despair and self-contempt?

The election of an ignorant idiot who expresses openly racist or criminal views has profound similarities (on a psychic level, but also on a political level) with massacres that can only be explained in terms of painful insanity, of suicidal desire. What we continue to call fascism, nationalism or racism can no longer be explained in political terms. Politics is nothing more than the spectacular terrain in which these movements manifest themselves, but the dynamics of contemporary social aggressiveness has almost nothing to do with the self-proclaimed ideal values of the fascism of the last century, with the nationalism of modern world. The rhetoric is often similar, but the content is far from politically rational.

Only the discourse on suffering, humiliation, loneliness and despair can account for the phenomenon that now characterises most of the history of the world in the phase of exhaustion of nervous energy, and awaiting an extinction that presents itself more and more as an inevitable horizon.

The generation that is defined with ironic bitterness as the “last generation” (or also “generation Z”), the generation that has learned more words from a machine than from the voice of its mother, or from another human being, has been formed in an increasingly intolerable physical and mental environment. The communication of this generation has almost exclusively developed in a techno-immersive environment whose consistency is purely semiotic.

We prepare to experience extinction itself as an immersive simulation. Media production is increasingly saturated with the signs of this despair, which function both as symptoms of malaise and as factors for the propagation of a pathology: I am thinking of films like *Joker*, *Parasite*, but also of global neo-television series, like Netflix's *Squid Game* and a thousand other similar products.

The viral trauma of Covid only multiplied the effect of hyper-semiotisation, but the technical and cultural conditions already existed. At this point, all we can do is try to understand this mutation, and we can define it as a de-sexualising mutation that affects desire.

Desire has not ceased to be the engine of the collective subjectivation process, but this subjectivation now manifests itself as anxiety, as self-mutilation or sometimes as aggression, because by not being able to flourish and express itself, it is perverted into aggressive forms.

The de-sexualisation of desire of which we find traces everywhere translates on a social level into a de-historicisation of the motivations for collective action. We are witnessing a massive phenomenon of disengagement and desertion: majority abstention from politics, desertion from procreation, abandonment of work. This phenomenon must be the object of a theoretical analysis (diagnosis) that enables strategies of discursive and political action (therapy) that we currently completely lack.

taken from here

Foto: Sylvia John

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